

DRAFT

Policy Guidance for Regional Response for Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness and Encampments Throughout San Diego County

Background:

Over the last several years San Diego County has consistently ranked among the top ten communities in the nation with the largest number of persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines individuals living unsheltered as those residing in places not meant for human habitation such as cars, parks, sidewalks, abandoned buildings, or on the street.¹ At this time, across San Diego County, there is a lack of both temporary housing options and more importantly permanent housing options to meet the need of those living unsheltered.

According to the 2019 Point-In-Time (PIT) Count there were a minimum of 4,476 unsheltered persons across San Diego County. At a regional level, central San Diego (City of San Diego) accounted for 58% (2,600 persons) of the unsheltered population, East County 13% (563 persons), North County Inland 11% (493 persons), North County Coastal 11% (471 persons), and South County at 8% (349 persons). According to the 2018 PIT Count 35% are age 55 and older, African Americans and Native Americans are disproportionately represented compared to the general adult population in the County, 43% reported a chronic health condition, 43% reported a mental health issue, and 14% reported a substance abuse issue. *(Note: update with 2019 figures when available)*

There are substantial costs, both human and fiscal, associated with unsheltered homelessness. First and foremost, living unsheltered significantly impacts people who experience it. It is traumatic, dangerous, and jeopardizes the health and well-being of those who are most vulnerable. Unsheltered homelessness also significantly increases costs related to healthcare, public safety, commerce, sanitation, the environment, tourism, and is a constant concern of the general public.

The Regional Task Force on the Homeless (RTFH) is responsible for coordinating the efforts to address homelessness, including unsheltered homelessness, across multiple sectors including local, state, and federal government agencies, non-profits, healthcare, philanthropy, education, and business leaders. Key stakeholders throughout the region are already making significant progress in coordinating outreach efforts to address unsheltered homelessness including those living in encampments. The RTFH, County, various cities, local law enforcement including several municipalities who have dedicated Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT) within their law enforcement agency, and non-profits are convening and working together on the issue more than ever before. Lastly, elected officials and personnel within the eighteen municipalities and the County of San Diego represent significant leadership on the issue and can significantly impact the needs and suffering of those living unsheltered across the region.

Purpose:

¹ United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (2008) A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People; Office of Community Planning and Development.

It is the intent of this policy to provide guidance on a shared vision and approach for the region including the eighteen municipalities in San Diego County as well as the unincorporated areas for addressing the needs of unsheltered persons including those residing in homeless encampments. The tenets outlined below serve to guide local municipalities and other local government agencies in both the design and implementation of best-practice policies, activities, and direction of respective departments that interact with unsheltered individuals including housing and social services programs, law enforcement, sanitation services, public works, code enforcement, park and recreation, library, and fire-rescue.

Mission Statement:

In order to better meet the needs of unsheltered individuals and those in encampments across the county, all eighteen cities and the unincorporated areas should strive to align their policies and procedures while coordinating resources under a shared vision and goal.

Policy Guidelines for Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness: Shared Vision and Position

1. **Regional Engagement and Collaboration:** Addressing unsheltered homelessness and encampments cannot successfully be done by one municipality or department alone. Municipalities need to be engaging with, collaborating, and communicating with federal, state, and regional stakeholders, specifically the RTFH and the County of San Diego, for progress to be made.
2. **Address the Affordable Housing Crisis:** Homelessness, especially unsheltered homelessness, is largely driven by a lack of affordable housing options throughout the region. The most effective way to address unsheltered homelessness is through the provision of a permanent stable home with appropriate ongoing support. To address unsheltered homelessness, affordable housing is greatly needed and more specifically housing with the appropriate level of supportive services in the form of case management, behavioral health treatment which includes mental health and substance use disorder services, healthcare services, and life skills supports is critical for maintaining housing stability. Models such as permanent supportive housing, defined as subsidized affordable housing with wrap-around supportive services to meet the needs of homeless individuals who are the hardest to serve, is a national best-practice and proven to be the most effective solution for chronic homelessness. Municipalities shall support the creation of affordable and permanent supportive housing in their jurisdictions.
3. **Respectful, Person-Centered, and Trauma Informed Approach:** All efforts and interactions by municipal departments and entities are to be respectful, compassionate, and driven by empathy for the individual's situation. Interactions should strive to be coordinated with available outreach and services programs and focused both on assisting individuals to resolve their homeless situation in a manner that is respectful, dignified, trauma informed, and supportive while at the same time meeting the needs for public safety and health.
4. **Balanced Enforcement:** Local municipalities shall seek to not criminalize homelessness. With not enough temporary and permanent housing options to meet the demand, individuals have limited options and may have no other choice but to live outside or in vehicles. Laws that limit activities such as sitting, sleeping outside or in vehicles, or eating in public spaces may unfairly

target people living on the streets. In the absence of adequate alternatives or private places to perform those activities, people have the right to do undertake these activities in public, and local ordinances need to reflect that. At the same time municipalities are obligated to strike a balance between respecting the rights of individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness while responding to community needs for safe streets, healthy neighborhoods, and responsible behavior. However, citing and arresting individuals for low-level quality of life infractions can be traumatizing and impede progress for the individual to exit homelessness. Municipalities need to review current local laws and consider amending as necessary.

5. **Address Racial Disparities:** Understanding that persons of color, especially African Americans, are overrepresented in the unsheltered homeless population compared to the general population, municipalities shall strive to make the services, resources, and personnel who interact with the populations as reflective, responsive, and equitable as possible to those experiencing unsheltered homelessness.

Policy Guidelines for Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness: Services and Supports

1. **Access to Basic Services:** Municipalities should strive to ensure that individuals have access to basic necessity services that reflect human dignity. Municipalities need to arrange for, through the help of regional partners, adequate access to basic services including access to clean restrooms, showers, trash disposal, laundry, and storage facilities.
2. **Coordinate with Outdoor Meal Programs:** Municipalities shall support coordination with outdoor meal programs and volunteer groups seeking to provide meals to those living unsheltered so that such meal programs operate in a safe, sanitary, and effective manner. Outdoor meal programs shall comply with AB 2178.
3. **Outreach and Engagement:** Outreach and engagement to individuals living unsheltered should primarily be led by non-uniformed homeless outreach specialists supported by law enforcement personnel in providing outreach, coordination, and support when addressing unsheltered homelessness. Strong partnerships among non-uniformed homeless services personnel and law enforcement is critical for success.
4. **Definition of Street Outreach:** Street outreach is a professional homeless services intervention that seeks to engage individuals living unsheltered in a culturally competent and trauma informed manner, provides links to mainstream services, use diversion and problem solving techniques, and is primarily focused on supporting individuals with accessing permanent or temporary housing by building trusting relationships and ongoing rapport. Municipalities providing funding for outreach services in their jurisdiction shall adopt this definition.
5. **Regional Deployment of Outreach Services:** The RTFH and County shall ensure that street outreach resources they fund will be deployed regionally in all eighteen cities and in the unincorporated areas, and shall work with municipalities to communicate and notify when

outreach services are provided in their jurisdictions. RTFH and the County shall distribute and deploy outreach services proportionately based on numbers of homeless persons identified through the annual PIT Count as well as new areas identified as high concentrations through other data-informed methods.

6. **Housing Ready Perspective:** Street outreach services shall employ a perspective that all unsheltered individuals are currently housing ready meaning that all individuals will be receptive of housing and services when offered in a fashion that best meet their needs without any preconditions. However, for some individuals it may take longer to agree to housing and services, and municipalities need to respect that longer engagement may be needed. For individuals who may be initially hesitant to engage in services, it is the role of the street outreach personnel to be persistent, develop trust and rapport, and be there with an available housing resource when individuals are ready.
7. **Services Targeted to Most in Need:** Street outreach services shall be targeted to those who have been identified as those in most need and will be focused on assisting individuals with a permanent or temporary housing resolution as quickly as possible. Street outreach services shall target those most in need and provide more intense services, encompassing case management and navigation services, over a longer duration to a smaller group of individuals focused on housing placement. Street outreach services shall still be provided to a broader population of unsheltered individuals, however more intense and ongoing services are provided to a smaller subset of those in greatest need.
8. **Definition of Most in Need:** Municipalities shall adopt the definition of “those is most need,” as defined in the approved 2018 RTFH Coordinated Entry System (CES) Policies and Procedures as outlined below:

Housing priority is determined according to the Service Entry Priorities outlined in the CoC Community Standards, as below:

Chronically homeless individuals, youth and families with:

1. *The longest history of experiencing homelessness and the most needs*
2. *The longest history of experiencing homelessness*
3. *The most needs, particularly mental illness or substance use disorder*
4. *All other: Non-Chronically homeless individuals, youth and families*

RTFH further defines “Those with the most needs,” as households with a diagnosed serious mental illness, substance use disorder, children under the age of four, or adults with a documented qualifying medical condition (including terminal illness; condition requiring the use of substantial medical equipment, such as an oxygen tank or kidney dialysis machine)

In addition to using the definition set forth by the RTFH for those in most need, municipalities may also take into consideration individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness who are high utilizers of costly city or county services such as fire-rescue and/or law enforcement. Those with high utilization of fire-rescue, law enforcement resources, and healthcare will also be

determined as those in the most need and will be prioritized for services. Street outreach services will coordinate with fire-rescue, law enforcement, and healthcare entities to determine high utilizers.

9. **Homeless Management Information System:** Street outreach workers shall utilize the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to input demographic and service data that enables the community to make data-driven improvements to the street outreach approach and to address the needs of the unsheltered population.
10. **Coordinated Entry System:** Street outreach services shall fully participate in the region's CES and will specifically use a By Name List to prioritize and target individuals for services and manage caseloads. CES and By Name List are defined as:
 - a. **Coordinated Entry System:** A national best practice and HUD required activity that ensures a coordinated, systemic process for how the community provides access for individuals and families who are at-risk or currently experiencing homelessness to the homeless system, how individuals receive a standardized assessment of their needs, how resources are prioritized, and how individuals and families are referred for housing and supportive services. In San Diego, the RTFH is responsible for oversight and coordination of San Diego County's CES.
 - b. **By Name List:** List of names of individuals and families currently experiencing homelessness generated through the CES which provides important information such as: identifying who is experiencing homelessness in a given region, basic demographics, acuity scores from their CES Assessment, and recommended housing intervention. The list is prioritized based on acuity scores and other factors to determine those in most need.
11. **Temporary Housing Facilities and Programs:** Supporting rapid exits from the streets may require a brief stay in a temporary setting while a permanent housing situation is identified. Temporary settings may include a shelter, hotel or motel, safe parking lot, recuperative care, temporary rental assistance, or other temporary housing settings. Municipalities, along with the RTFH and County, shall evaluate the need for temporary options in their community and if needed, support low-cost options for the creation or expansion of temporary shelter beds including the use of unused buildings, low-cost temporary structures, partnerships with the faith-based community, hotel or motel vouchers, underutilized public or non-profit/church parking lots, or repurposing of transitional housing. To meet the needs of unsheltered through temporary housing programs, must operate with a low-barrier approach that includes not requiring individuals to be clean or sober, engage in services, leave their pets, leave their partners, have a source of income, and others.

Policy Guidelines for Addressing Unsheltered Homelessness: Addressing Encampments

1. **Definition of an Encampment:** A homeless encampment is a location in which tents or other hand-built structures occupied by individuals experiencing homelessness are within public property and/or right of way.
2. **Multi-Disciplinary Approach:** Municipalities shall strive to use a multi-disciplinary approach that includes the RTFH, County, contracted non-profits, law enforcement, and other necessary departments for addressing homeless encampments. The approach shall be focused on diversion and problem solving, offering support and services including temporary housing, permanent housing, personal property storage, and to positively work with those living in encampments prior to the closure of the encampment and subsequent abatement. Many individuals living in encampments may have acute health and behavioral health issues, specifically substance use disorders, and municipalities shall coordinate with the County for providing health and behavioral health services and supports as part of encampment resolutions. The County shall strive to ensure the provision of adequate levels of behavioral health support to those residing in encampments based on need.
3. **Assess and Prioritize Based on Need:** When addressing encampments, municipalities and partners shall assess encampments for needs, prioritizing specific encampments based on risk which include health, safety, and the vulnerability of populations residing in them.
4. **Closure and Abatement:** Encampment closure and abatement is necessary and must happen as encampments pose a significant public safety and public health concern for those residing in encampments and the general public. Municipalities shall provide proper and adequate notice that includes ample opportunities and time for service engagement and positive housing resolutions prior to and during encampment closures and abatements. Encampment abatements shall be conducted only at the conclusion of a multi-disciplinary assessment that includes the evaluation from street outreach personnel and other stakeholders, to ensure that all avenues of providing assistance and supports have been exhausted and thus the encampment is appropriate for closure.
5. **Temporary Housing Options:** Municipalities shall strive to dedicate temporary options to assist those transitioning out of encampments successfully. If an individual living in an encampment is living in a municipality that has available access to temporary shelter or other temporary options, and has agreed to that resource, the encampment cannot be closed and abated, unless for health or safety reasons, until the temporary placement has been arranged and is available.
6. **Seek to Repurpose and Secure Space:** Municipalities shall strive to develop strategies for repurposing or securing the space where the encampment was located, as appropriate, so as not to have unsheltered individuals return to the location and revive the encampment.